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OWEN'S "DULCE ET DECORUM EST" AND THE DANGER OF THE SUBLIME

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Abstract

Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" is a poem written with a sublime style about a horrible and terrifying event: an exhausted soldier seeing his comrade gassed to death in the battle field. The paper critiques the eloquence with which the events are narrated in the poem. While Owen challenges patriarchy and insinuates that it is responsible for the horror of war, he maintains in the poem, to a great extent, a conventional approach to versification that does not subvert the traditional patriarchal forms of composition. The diction of the poem is deliberately chosen to create aural, visual, and intellectual effects familiar to generations of poets before him. This failure of representation confirms my suspicion that the poet at the moment of composing the text has never lived the agony and the intensity of the experience described by the traumatized soldier. Owen's exaggeration in detailing violence in sequential order and with sublime idiom leads to the desensitization of the readers' feelings, as is the case with the presentation of horror and violence in today's visual media. The sublime language used in the text, subliminally moderates the final images stored in the reader's subconscious about the violence of war and renders the soldier's experience less terrible than what the reality is. Thus, Owen's poem through its sublimated style and idiom, acts subliminally on the reader's subconscious paving the way for the familiarization of the horrors of war, to the extent that these horrors cease to become that terrible

Keywords: Owen, Wilfred, Poetry, Sublime, War.

Introduction

Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" is seen as a strong expression of the ugliness of war; and "an attack on the idea of war being glorious." (Kerr, 1993: 48) The poem transmits an irritating visual clip, fully animated in vivid colors, of embittered and battered soldiers marching to their death. It also, cogently presents a nightmarish vision of hell uploading all its demons into the root directory of a soldier who saw one of his comrades gassed to death.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,

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Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge. (Owen, 2008: 15)

The cinematic-like images that Owen has confected skillfully and professionally remain grafted in the reader's memory long after the poem is read and finished with. Eloquently, in twenty-eight lines of well-confected and well-articulated verse, the poem presents a soldier's extremely tense and dreadful experience.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.— (Owen, 2008: 15)

Sublimity out of Context

Indeed, it is the elaborate eloquence and the well-structured articulation of this highly disturbing experience that really betray the poem's lack of immediacy. The poem's sublime language contributes to the poem's artificiality, desensitizes the reader to the horrors of war and thus makes the poet an accomplice with those whom his speaker-soldier attacks as disseminators of lies.

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori. (Owen, 2008: 16)

Scrutinizing Owen's poem under the magnifying lenses of Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime*, and Harold Pinter's view on discourse reveals that the poem perches on a detrimental fault line that destabilizes its mainstream readings. While Owen challenges patriarchy and insinuates that it is responsible for the horror of war, he maintains in the poem, to a great extent, a conventional approach to versification that does not subvert the traditional patriarchal forms of composition. The diction of the poem is deliberately chosen to create aural, visual, and intellectual effects familiar to generations of poets before him. In spite of his attempt at, what might seem to some critics, some colloquialism, "Knock-kneed", "coughing like hags", "blood-shod", the poem is marked by its high diction and entrancing expressions that smell of the styles of previous generations of traditional poets. In short, the poem with its imitation of conventional poetic form, excellence of diction, elevated language, and persuasion effect is a paradigm of what Longinus terms the sublime in expression. A close reading of the poem reveals the sublimity of articulation through the use of adjuration line 25, asyndeton in lines 2 and 3, accumulation of figures of speech in lines 1-6, hyperbaton in lines 3 and 13, periphrasis in line 4 and familiar language in its right place in lines 1, 2, 9 and 20. The employment of these figures of speech wrapped in traditional rhymes and cadences cannot possibly represent the actual idiom of a wretched, battered and embittered soldier, during an intensely traumatic moment of his life. A real soldier in an identical situation will cuss using the ugliest idiom that comes to mouth. This failure of representation confirms my suspicion that the poet at the moment of composing the text has never lived the agony and the intensity of the experience described by the traumatized soldier. It is true that Owen joined the war; and it is true that he tragically died in the front few days before the end of the war; yet he seems to have made peace with war. Owen's published letters from the front to his family do not reflect, even from a distance, the fictional soldier's sentiments and emotions in "Dulce et Decorum est." On the contrary, some of Owen's letters from the trenches

give the impression of familiarity and coziness. In a letter to his mother few days before he got killed, he wrote:

> Dearest Mother,
> So thick is the smoke in this cellar that I can hardly see by a candle 12 inches away. And so thick are the inmates that I can hardly write for pokes, nudges, and jolts. On my left, the company commander snores on a bench. It is a great life. I am more oblivious than the less, dear mother, of the ghastly glimmering of the guns outside and the hollow crashing of the shells. I hope you are as warm as I am, soothed in your room as I am here. I am certain you could not be visited by a band of friends half so fine as surround us here. There is no danger down here - or if any, it will be well over before you read these line... (Owen and Bell, 1967: 62)

Harold Pinter, a dramatist who knew well how to deal with the discourses of pain and suffering asserts that "the more acute the experience, the less articulate its expression." Wilfred Owen's tormented soldier comes very slightly near complying with this assumption when in horror he yells "Gas! Gas!" Unfortunately, this sweeping second of inarticulate expression yields itself to highly articulate utterances such as "ecstasy of fumbling", 'innocent tongues", "zest", "glory" in addition to the Latin phrase "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori." The homogeneity between the sublimely composed voice of the poet, and the vocality of the soldier articulating eloquently his nightmarish experience of war, makes the poem sound unreal and tints it with deliberate artificiality. As a result the poem presents a model of expression different from the real, as the real should be inarticulate, fragmented, desublimated and chaotic.

Conclusion

To conclude, Owen's exaggeration in detailing violence in sequential order and with sublime idiom leads to the desensitization of the readers' feelings, as is the case with the presentation of horror and violence in today's visual media. The sublime language used in the text, subliminally moderates the final images stored in the reader's subconscious about the violence of war and renders the soldier's experience less terrible than what the reality is. Thus, Owen's poem through its sublimated style and idiom, acts subliminally on the reader's subconscious paving the way for the familiarization of the horrors of war, to the extent that these horrors cease to become that terrible; and war still goes on.

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